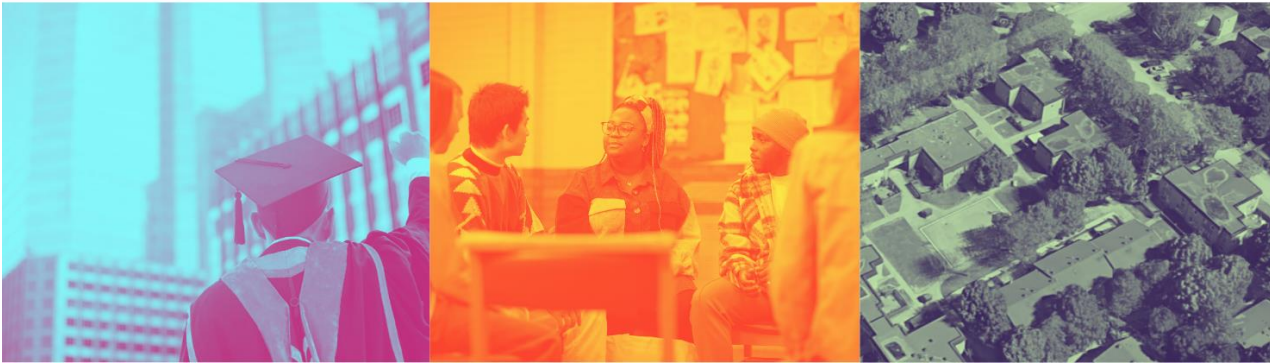


**YOUTH
SYMPOSIUM**

**EXPLORING COMMUNITY-DRIVEN
SYSTEMS CHANGE FOR BLACK &
RACIALIZED YOUTH IN OTTAWA**



Symposium Report

Community Child & Youth Network (CCYN)

2024

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Special thanks to those that contributed to the Youth Symposium through financial support:



Executive Summary

The Community Child and Youth Network (CCYN) hosted a youth symposium “*Exploring Community-Driven Systems Change for Black and Racialized youth in Ottawa*”, bringing together youth leaders, community advocates, educators, and system professionals, for a day of dynamic discussions and meaningful engagement. By providing a platform to explore critical issues affecting youth, particularly those impacted by the justice and education systems- our goal was to spark a community-driven local strategy for addressing and responding to the needs and well-being of young people.

The event was structured around a presentation of the 2023 Laidlaw Foundation Report (The State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario), a series of panel discussions: youth-led and a systems-focused, followed by a keynote address. Each segment offered unique insights into the systemic barriers faced by Black and Racialized youth, while also highlighting actionable solutions driven by the needs and voices of youth.

Highlights

- 1) **Youth Engagement and Leadership:** This symposium emphasized the importance of youth taking a significant role in shaping conversations about their own futures. From the youth-led panels to active participation in the Q&A sessions, youth played a pivotal role in driving discussions on systemic challenges.
- 2) **Empowerment and Solutions-Oriented Dialogue:** Empowering youth to lead and engage in conversations on justice and education system reforms was a key takeaway. Participants left with a deeper understanding of the value of including youth perspectives in decision-making processes and policy changes.
- 3) **Addressing Systemic Issues:** Panel discussions underscored the need for systemic changes within the education and justice sectors, with participants offering solutions rooted in lived experiences. The open dialogues provided clear recommendations for institutions to better serve and support equity-deserving communities.

With over 137 attendees (88 youth, 46 service providers, 3 elected officials), the symposium succeeded in fostering a sense of collaboration and shared responsibility among attendees, ensuring that youth voices were not only heard but centered in discussions about system reform, policy advocacy, and youth engagement.

Jade Odiase

Community Child and Youth Network Facilitator



Introduction

Black and Racialized youth in Ottawa continue to face persistent systemic barriers across systems such as education, justice, housing, and social services. These challenges are not new; they are rooted in longstanding structural inequities that require community-driven solutions. Too often, policies are developed without the input of those most impacted. It is critical that youth—especially those directly impacted—are engaged as key partners in designing, influencing, and leading systemic change.

The “Exploring Community-Driven Systems Change for Black and Racialized Youth in Ottawa” symposium, hosted by the Community Child and Youth Network (CCYN), was created to shift this narrative and begin systems change work. It was a powerful demonstration of community mobilizing to not only engage youth, but to listen to them on their own terms and in their own spaces. Too often, we talk about youth engagement as consultation—asking questions without real intent to act. This symposium centered youth as experts in their own experiences, recognizing the value of their intelligence, insight, and leadership in shaping community responses and system reform. It brought together youth leaders, community advocates, and system professionals to build collective strategies for transforming systems and placing youth at the heart of policy change.

This report captures the knowledge, experiences, and solutions shared throughout the symposium. It is both a record of the day and a call to action for funders, policymakers, and community stakeholders to invest in youth-led advocacy, elevate community expertise, and move toward collaborative systems change that is accountable to those it claims to serve. Black and Racialized youth deserve more than

surface level inclusion; they deserve meaningful opportunities to shape the systems that impact their lives. By documenting the conversations and recommendations, this report contributes to a growing movement that demands equity not only in outcomes, but in process and power. It highlights how youth can and must be active participants in reimagining systems- because when we follow their leadership, we build approaches that are not only more just, but more effective, sustainable, and rooted in lived experiences.

It is important to acknowledge the report presented delves into specific data to Indigenous youth in Ontario, however, our symposium focuses on Black and Racialized youth. As a non-Indigenous organization, we do not feel it is our place to lead dialogue on these findings; we understand that doing so without Indigenous leadership would risk perpetuating the same erasure and harm this work seeks to address. We are committed to building meaningful relationships with Indigenous-led organizations in Ottawa and beyond, and we look forward to future collaborations that center Indigenous voices, leadership, and self-determined approaches in addressing systemic change.

Background

The Britannia Woods Community House (BWCH), the Ottawa Coalition of Community Houses' Child and Youth Network (CCYN), and the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD) collaboratively hosted the youth symposium "Exploring Community-Driven Systems Change for Black and Racialized Youth in Ottawa". This shared forum centered the experiences, skills, and visions of Black and Racialized youth from 16 priority neighbourhoods across Ottawa, with the goal of sparking a community-driven local strategy to address and respond to their needs and well-being.

Community houses, located within social housing neighbourhoods, play a vital role in engaging youth by providing safe, accessible, and culturally affirming spaces that support their growth, leadership, and well-being. Similarly, the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD) brings deep expertise in youth-centered approaches that are anti-racist, trauma-informed, and anti-oppressive. These hubs support youth growth, leadership, and well-being, particularly for those experiencing systemic racism and discrimination, by offering meaningful programs and services that foster connection, empowerment, and skill-building. Moreover, these organizations reinforce the importance of building strong, trusted connections with youth in the community and creating environments where youth feel valued and empowered. Their combined efforts ensure that programs and services not only address immediate needs but also foster long-term resilience and systemic change rooted in the lived experiences of those most impacted.

This symposium was a timely response to broader provincial conversations about systemic harm. In November 2023, the Laidlaw Foundation released *The State of Black and Indigenous Youth in Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous and*

Racialized Youth. This report outlined the ongoing inequities and systemic failures impacting youth across the province and put forth calls for urgent action rooted in community-based responses prioritizing youth voices, experiences, and leadership. The symposium elevated the report's findings by convening local stakeholders, including youth, service providers, and system players, to unite, learn and plan collaborative strategies to promote the well-being and success of Black and Racialized youth.

This event would not have been possible without the dedication and vision of our planning committee, whose collaboration ensured the day was thoughtful, inclusive, and grounded in community needs. The committee played a crucial role in shaping the youth symposium, from developing panel questions to supporting logistics, and outreach. We are deeply grateful to Faduma Yusuf (Board Member, Catholic Centre for Immigrants), Gerald Dragon (Community Development and Engagement, Sandy Hill Community Health Centre), Mohamed Sofa (Executive Director, Britannia Woods Community House), Mandi Pekan (Centre for Resilience and Social Development), Beth Tooley (Coalition Coordinator, Ottawa Coalition of Community Houses), Carla Thür (Coalition Facilitator, OCCH), Jade Odiase (Child and Youth Network Facilitator, OCCH) and Anaelle Dereje (BELCD Algonquin placement student), for their leadership, insight, and ongoing commitment to equity and youth-led systems change.

Symposium Objectives

The symposium aimed to highlight calls to action in the Laidlaw report, and promote anti-racism, advocacy and allyship through:

- 1) Increasing solidarity to dismantle systemic racism, discrimination, and other injustices
- 2) Amplifying youth leadership and voices
- 3) Promoting inclusive decision-making by involving youth in all conversations and decisions related to policies, programs, and services that impact them.

By bringing together the most impacted communities often excluded from conversations about their own well-being, this symposium marked a crucial step towards building a community led action plan to respond collectively to systemic harms. It laid the foundation for ongoing partnerships dedicated to advancing youth-centered systems change in Ottawa.

Laidlaw Foundation Presentation



The Laidlaw Foundation is a private charitable organization based in Toronto that is committed to supporting Black, Indigenous, and Racialized youth, particularly those impacted by the justice, education, and child welfare systems. Their work is grounded in meaningful youth engagement, embedding young people in every stage of their process from ideation to implementation and decision-making. This commitment ensures that programming and advocacy efforts are youth-centered and community informed. The Laidlaw Foundation is currently in the final year of its five-year strategic plan (2019-2024), which outlines three core priority areas: elevating youth voices and experiences within the justice, education, and child welfare systems, promoting equity and accountability within systems and institutions, and advocating for evidence-based policy¹.

The Laidlaw Foundation is a private charitable organization based in Toronto that is committed to supporting Black, Indigenous, and Racialized youth, particularly those impacted by the justice, education, and child welfare systems. Their work is grounded in meaningful youth engagement, embedding young people in every stage of their process from ideation to implementation and decision-making. This commitment ensures that programming and advocacy efforts are youth-centered and community informed. The Laidlaw Foundation is currently in the final year of its five-year strategic plan (2019-2024), which outlines three core priority areas: elevating youth voices and experiences within the justice, education, and child welfare systems, promoting equity and accountability within systems and institutions, and advocating for evidence-based policy

A cornerstone of the Foundation's work is its Youth Advisory Committee (YAC), the YAC played a foundational role in shaping the report discussed during the presentation. Members of the YAC contributed to the report's discussions, analysis, and recommendations by sharing lived experiences and identifying community needs. This input provided critical insight into ways we can address the

¹ Laidlaw Foundation (2023). The State of Black and Indigenous Youth of Ontario: An Examination of the Experiences and Impacts of Policing on Black, Indigenous and Racialized Youth. Toronto, ON" Laidlaw Foundation.

needs of youth through future programming, advocacy, and partnerships with community-based organizations.

The report was made to raise awareness about the challenges and barriers that Black, Indigenous, and Racialized youth face while also advocating for transformative systems change. It highlights the co-occurring acts of over-policing and underserving youth in the various systems of education, justice, healthcare, mental health, housing, and employment. Lastly, it concludes with calls to action directed at all levels of government, philanthropy, and community institutions.

Key Findings and Data Highlights

Demographics and Population Distribution:

- Over 240,000 Black youth aged 15 – 34 and 150, 000 Indigenous youth aged 15 – 24 live in Canada².
- Black youth are concentrated in urban centers like Toronto, Ottawa, Oshawa, and Hamilton³.
- Indigenous youth are more evenly distributed across urban (i.e., Toronto, Ottawa) and non-urban (e.g., Thunder Bay, Sudbury) regions⁴.

Discrimination and Policing:

- 54% of Black youth and 83% of Indigenous youth aged 15 to 44 report experiencing discrimination⁵.
- 21% of Indigenous and 16% of Black respondents stated police as the source.
- Racial profiling and over-policing result in a “cradle-to-grave” cycle of surveillance, punishment, and limited opportunities.

Child Welfare:

- Black and Indigenous youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system.
- Youth aging out of care face minimal transitional planning and limited post-care support.

Education:

- Disparities in education begin early, with Black and Indigenous youth being discouraged from advanced courses and steered away from university pathways toward college or gap years.
- School is often the first point of contact with the justice system, especially for Black youth, referring to the school to prison pipeline.

² *Ibid*, pg. 7.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 13.

- Students are both over-policed (as perpetrators) and under-supported (as victims)⁶.

Employment and Economic Marginalization:

- Racialized youth persistent barriers to secure and meaningful employment: higher unemployment rates, lack of mentorship and career pathways, discriminatory hiring practices.
- Face barriers to high-paying or specialized careers due to limited academic guidance and systemic streaming.
- Poverty cycles are reinforced by educational streaming, lack of targeted supports in career development, discriminatory hiring practices and lack of access to higher education⁷.

Healthcare and Mental Health:

- Mental health concerns in Racialized youth are often misinterpreted as behavioral issues.
- Black youth typically access mental health services for the first time via the criminal justice system or emergency departments.⁸
- Indigenous young women face especially higher rates of chronic health issues and poor outcomes⁹.
- The healthcare system mirrors the justice system in structure, often excluding or mistreating racialized individuals.

Housing and Homelessness:

- 40% of Toronto's homeless population is Black, and Black individuals are overrepresented in the shelter system.
- Indigenous people make up 15% of the homeless population in Toronto, but only 0.5% of the total population¹⁰.
- Hidden homelessness (e.g., couch surfing) among Racialized youth is not fully captured in official statistics¹¹.
- Over-policing and underinvestment in racialized neighbourhoods worsen infrastructure, transit, and job access.

Recommendations and Solutions

⁶ *Ibid*, pg. 20.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 26.

⁸ Canada, Government of Canada (2022). *Social Determinants of Health and Health Inequities*, Ottawa, 2022. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/health-promotion/population-health/what-determines-health.html>

⁹ City of Toronto (2020a). *COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy: Advice from the Homelessness Service System*, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2020/ph/bgrd/backgroundfile-156419.pdf>.

¹⁰ Canadian Observatory on Homelessness. "Indigenous Peoples" (2021). <https://www.homelesshub.ca/about-homelessness/population-specific/indigenous-peoples>.

¹¹ City of Toronto (2020a). *COVID-19 Interim Shelter Recovery Strategy: Advice from the Homelessness Service System*, <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2020/ph/bgrd/backgroundfile-156419.pdf>.

Education:

- Remove police from schools to create safer, more inclusive environments.
- Introduce trauma-informed and culturally responsive support services¹².
- Decolonize the curriculum by integrating Black and Indigenous histories, cultural knowledge¹³

Youth Development and Employment:

- Provide mental health services, career counseling, and job readiness programs (e.g., resume building, interview prep, financial literacy).
- Offer culturally grounded supports that foster identity, pride, belonging.

Housing and Urban Policy:

- Collect race-based data to more accurately assess homelessness and housing needs.
- Ensure race-specific housing policies, protections against gentrification and displacement, and equitable access to new developments.

Healthcare Reform:

- Increase representation of racialized professionals in healthcare.
- Invest in community-based, culturally responsive health services.
- Recognize socioeconomic and racial determinants of health as key to understanding disparities.

Systemic Change and Youth Leadership:

- Promote anti-racist practices and allyship across institutions.
- Empower youth through leadership opportunities, direct involvement in decision-making.
- Develop wraparound services that are youth and family-driven, coordinated, holistic, and rooted in equity.

The presentation concluded by reiterating that youth must not only be heard but also be trusted as experts of their own experiences. The calls to action embedded in the report emphasize the need for collective commitment from community organizations, governments, institutions, and youth themselves to dismantle harmful systems and rebuild supportive, inclusive, and empowering structures. Thus, setting the tone for the rest of the symposium by grounding the discussion in lived experience, research, collective advocacy, and youth-led approaches.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid*, pg. 40.



Youth Panel and Q&A Summary

Panelists: Manock Lual (Founder of Prezdenial Hoops), Ife Dadjo (Youth Worker, Banff Ave Community House), Tommeson Toussaint (Community Safety and Wellbeing Worker, Banff Ave Community House), Mariana Shandwe (Youth Worker, Banff Ave Community House), and Chris Ibrahim (Youth Outreach Worker, Centre for Resilience and Social Development)

Moderator: Gaye Francois

The Laidlaw Foundation research emphasizes the significance of providing a platform for young voices to contribute to future programming, advocacy, and community partnerships.

There is an undeniable significance in young voices (in age and to the system) contributing meaningfully to systemic change to empower Black and Racialized youth to achieve their dreams and aspirations for themselves and for their communities. We curated a panel of skilled and dedicated set of young voices to explore how Ottawa's Black and racialized youth are doing and explore how we address and respond to the needs and wellbeing of young people.

Question 1: How are Black and Racialized youth doing your communities in 2024?

- Panelists shared their involvement in community programs, especially at community houses like Banff Avenue Community House, and emphasized the importance of going above and beyond for youth whose needs are not consistently met.
- There's a growing recognition among families about the value of available supports, with more families accessing needed services.
- Panelists emphasized the importance of youth being empowered and supported to take initiative and shape programs they want to see.

Question 2: What are some challenges they are facing, and do you see available supports easily accessible in your community for them?

- **Employment barriers:** limited job opportunities for youth, especially outside summer programs and during the school year.
- **Educational support:** lack of tutoring and homework help in communities; online tutoring is less effective than in-person.
- **Mental health stigma:** especially in Black and immigrant communities, mental health is often unrecognized or misunderstood, creating barriers to support.
- **Language and cultural barriers for parents:** parents are often unable to support schoolwork or navigate systems due to language limitations.
- **Lack of parental support:** youth often carry the burden of navigating systems alone; programs to support and educate parents were identified as crucial.
- **Social-emotional and spiritual needs:** youth face imposter syndrome and a lack of mentorship. Helping them find purpose and build confidence was highlighted.

Question 3: What roles do community-based youth programs play in their lives?

- **Job and leadership development:** programs gave youth their first jobs and helped them discover passions, like working with children.
- **Community support:** families from collectivist cultures value community-centered programs as they replicate familiar support systems.
- **Social development:** post-COVID, youth need spaces to rebuild social skills and connections.
- **Cultural belonging:** these programs offer spaces where Racialized youth feel seen, supported, and valued.

Question 4: What strategies are essential for fostering inclusivity and addressing unique challenges Black and Racialized youth face?

- **Youth-centered design:** engage youth directly to shape programs around their interests and needs.
- **Family and community inclusion:** involve parents and others close to youth for a holistic approach.

- **Consistency from program leaders:** stay committed to youth even if participation is low at first.
- **Building resilience and positive relationships:** staff should build trust, mentor youth, and foster safe, affirming environments.

Question 5: What are the key elements for successfully supporting Black and marginalized youth?

- **Relationship-building:** youth are more likely to attend programs when they feel personally connected to staff.
- **Engaging parents:** creating trust and offering support (e.g., financial forms, language translation) helps families thrive together.
- **Safe home environments:** support must extend beyond the community center to ensure youth feel secure at home.
- **Adapting to changing needs:** needs have evolved post-COVID; programming must respond in real-time.
- **Economic empowerment:** focus on real-world skill-building and job readiness.

Question 6: What can your peers do to advocate for change? What can the social service sector do?

- Raise awareness and speak openly about issues youth are facing.
- Education oneself and others to build collective understanding and action.
- Social service sector's role will be to create spaces for youth voices, fund youth-led initiatives, and advocate for systemic change through sustained investment and support,

Youth Panel Q&A Session

The Q&A session following the youth panel was one of the most dynamic and insightful parts of the symposium, offering a rich exchange of lived experiences, community-driven ideas, and calls to action. Audience members asked poignant questions ranging from academic equity to youth burnout, systemic barriers, and the role of community and political leaders in creating lasting change.

A recurring theme was the educational disparity faced by Racialized youth. One participant highlighted the systemic tracking of students into “less intense” courses due to financial barriers, such as the inability to afford tutoring or textbooks. This prompted discussion around community-based solutions like free in-person tutoring and homework clubs at community houses, services youth preferred over online options. Panelists emphasized the importance of listening to youth needs and continuously adapting services based on their input.

Another powerful moment came when a youth attendee asked how youth leaders can stay motivated in the face of constant struggle. Panelists responded with honesty, urging leaders to practice self-compassion, take breaks when needed, and remember the value of even small-scale impact. They shared that youth work should be relational and affirming, not transactional, and that genuine engagement (i.e., being present, listening without judgment, showing up authentically) builds lasting trust.

The session also sparked a critical conversation about burnout among frontline workers. Panelists emphasized the importance of honesty with oneself and with youth, creating mutual respect and understanding. They encouraged setting boundaries, accessing community support, and maintaining balance in life.

Representatives from community organizations, such as Parents for Diversity, contributed actionable insights. They offered collaboration opportunities to help families navigate the school system and access financial supports like OSAP grants and scholarships. Others pointed out that much of this information is not shared in schools, underscoring the need for better outreach and resource-sharing within communities.

The Q&A concluded with a powerful reminder that systemic change requires political engagement, accountability, and active listening to the youth in our communities. Youth were encouraged to connect directly with policymakers present at the event, reinforcing the idea that grassroots and institutional advocacy and actionable change must go together.



Systems Panel and Q&A Summary

Panelists: Gerald Dragon (Community Developer and Engagement, Sandy Hill Community Health Centre), Karen Umurerwa (Expert Steering Team Member, Alliance to End Homelessness), Lamar McCormack (Mental Health Counselor, Britannia Woods Community House), Mandi Pekan (Registered Psychotherapist Clinical Manager, Centre for Resilience and Social Development).

Moderator: Karim Mekki

Panelists engaged in a discussion on the roles of education, child welfare, employment, housing, justice, health, economic, intersectionality, poverty, and mental health in developing a community of practice.

Question 1: What does systems change look like?

- Systemic change means building new, life affirming systems rather than fixing broken ones.
- It requires a deep transformation of values, not surface-level reforms, or temporary fixes.
- Affordable housing, culturally competent mental health supports, and economic stability are foundational to systemic change.
- Youth voices must be central to change efforts; youth should be seen and engaged as experts and leaders.
- True systemic change centers historically excluded and Racialized communities, especially Black youth.

Question 2: What roles do community-based youth programs play in systems change?

- Community programs can be powerful tools for healing, empowerment, and connection.

- While they often act as “band-aids” to systemic issues, when rooted in community, they can be transformational.
- Programs should focus not only on mitigating trauma but also on cultivating positive experiences and self-worth.
- Youth programming must move beyond managing behavior and instead foster autonomy, imagination, and collective care.

Question 3: As a service provider at the systems level, how do you reinforce self-determination and autonomy for Black and Racialized youth in our communities?

- Youth should be actively involved in program design, strategy, and leadership, rather than a token consultation.
- Creating spaces where youth are affirmed, trusted, and heard builds confidence and leadership.
- Role modeling and mentorship are key, and representation matters deeply for youth to envision possibilities.
- Service providers should support youth in navigating systems while empowering them to challenge and reimagine them.

Question 4: How does your organization promote anti-racism and anti-oppression strategies in your sector?

- Anti-oppression work must be rooted in relationships, listening, and community accountability.
- Reframing mental health challenges as systemic rather than individual issues help address root causes.
- Being “responsible” as a service provider means being responsive to community needs and realities.
- Organizations must move beyond policy statements and embed anti-racism into everyday practice, including hiring, engagement, and service delivery.

Question 5: How do we create a shared strategy that centers Black and Racialized youth and holds service providers and systems accountable?

- The strategies already exist; we’ve heard them from youth and communities for years. The issue is political will and implementation, not lack of ideas.
- Power holders (i.e., funders and governments) must be pushed to act. Communities and nonprofits can only advocate so far without risking funding.
- Accountability requires specific, targeted strategies, not watered-down generalizations. For example, Ottawa’s original anti-Black racism strategy became a broader anti-racism plan, losing necessary focus.

- Grouping all Racialized communities under one umbrella dilutes lived experiences and erases distinct histories and realities.
- Measurement is critical: “you can’t change what you don’t measure.” Strategies must be based on disaggregated, community-specific data.
- Gerald highlighted the [Roots of Youth Violence report \(2008\)](#) as an example of ignored knowledge. The problems of poverty, racism, education, justice were clearly outlined then, yet remain unresolved in 2024.
- Shared strategy must be rooted in accountability, sustained funding, political courage, and respect for distinct community voices and needs.

Systems Panel Q&A Session

The Q&A session following the systems panel began with a central question: What can we learn from systems change leaders of the past, and how do we bring those lessons forward into our current context? Panelists reflected on the importance of understanding that meaningful systems change has always been difficult and required organizing, collective effort, and sustained commitment. Adding to this point, it was emphasized that one of the key lessons from historical leaders, like Marcus Garvey was the necessity of mobilizing like-minded people and building capacity across organizations. He encouraged young people in the room to see this gathering as an opportunity to unify their voices and take collective action, particularly given shared experiences across similar communities.

A second panelist added that many of the most transformative movements in history were youth-led. They stressed that systems often resist change because they are built to sustain themselves, but it is precisely the energy, innovation, and courage of young people that disrupts the status quo. Adults and system players need to take responsibility to create space, offer support, and push from behind rather than lead from the front. But most importantly, youth must be seen not only as participants but as leaders and co-creators.

Another contributor spoke about the need to move away from “expert-led” change and toward community-led movements. They challenged the notion that change must be designed by those with institutional credentials and emphasized the power of decentralized, grassroots organizing. The community, they noted, has been asked to repeat its needs and demands, such as dignified income and economic equity repeatedly often to no effect. An important call to action would be for a true shift in power and resources to community members, trusting in their wisdom and experience to drive change.

A young audience member then asked, “what programs exist to support youth who want to begin advocating in their communities?” The panelists encouraged youth to start by engaging with their local

community centers, getting to know the coordinators, and voicing ideas. Sharing firsthand experiences, they highlighted how young people who speak up can shape programming in meaningful ways. Lastly, highlighting the importance of more grassroots funding opportunities that are not monopolized by large organizations and the accessible to young people with creative ideas and a desire to lead.

A youth audience member raised a concern: “while there’s a lot of talk about giving young people a voice, what happens when youth don’t yet know what they want or are hesitant to speak up?”

Panelists emphasized the importance of meeting youth where they are at and noted that advocacy may not be the starting point. But having programs focusing on building trust, connection, and authentic relationships.

Another panelist echoed this sentiment, adding that we must be willing to play the “long game” when working with youth. Relationship-building and consistency are key, and only through trust and connection can youth begin to uncover and express the change they want to make. Rather than demanding youth step into advocacy, adults must remain present, intentional, and supportive, allowing leadership to grow organically from within.

This Q&A session underscored that systems change is long, challenging work, but with sustained relationship-building, youth empowerment, and redistribution of power and resources, transformation is not only possible but inevitable.

Keynote Speaker: Dr. Krista Edwards

Dr. Krista Edwards, a school psychologist and co-founder of the Black School Psychologist Network, delivered a moving and thought-provoking keynote address that grounded the closing of the symposium in reflection, intention, and vision. With deep roots in both community and advocacy, Dr. Edwards brings a wealth of experience working at the intersection of education, mental health, and racial justice. Her work centers Black children and youth, and she is deeply committed to building systems of care that are responsive, culturally grounded, and liberatory.

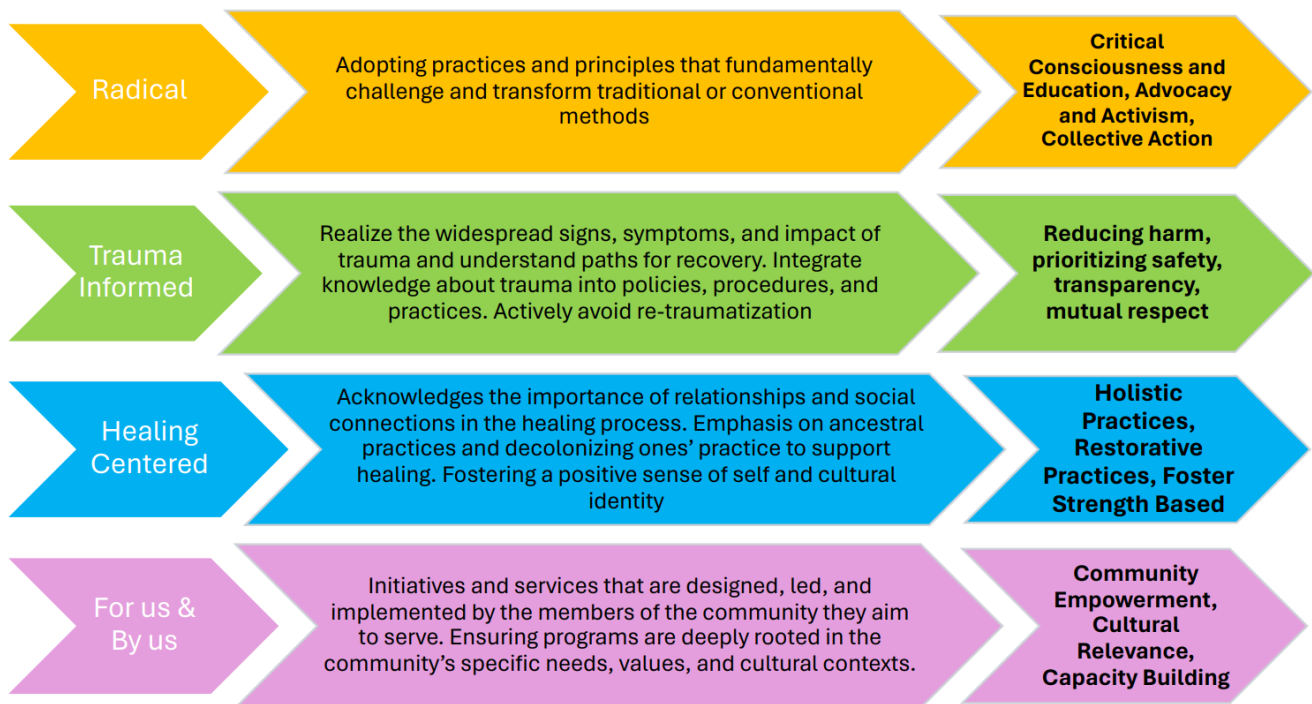
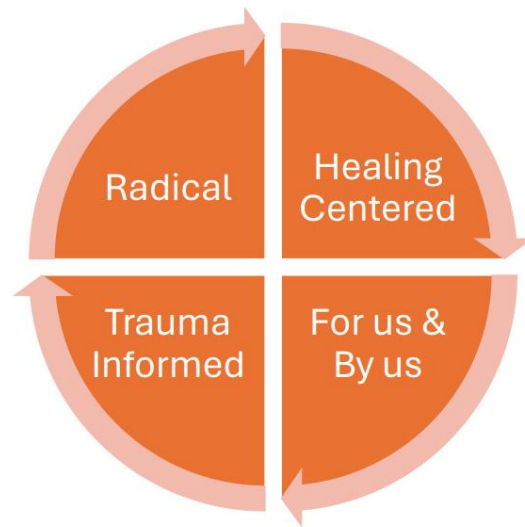
Opening with breathwork and a meditation that pulled from Black Liturgies and the writings of Audre Lorde, Dr. Edwards set a tone of grounding and collective presence. She reminded attendees that “without community, there is no liberation,” and invited us to consider not just where we are, but where we hope to go together. Sharing personal reflections on the people who shaped her journey, she illustrated how true support and liberation happen in the community, not in isolation.



Dr. Edwards also drew from her recent research with Black gender expansive youth, illuminating how young people define and find community. These included family and dance teams to pride clubs and online spaces, thus, highlighting the importance of spaces where youth feel accepted, supported, and seen. These insights shaped the central message of her address: that we must listen to youth and build frameworks that reflect their realities.

She introduced a community-driven liberatory framework rooted in being radical, trauma-informed, healing-centered, and built “for us, by us.” This framework challenges conventional approaches by centering collective action, cultural identity, and sustainable change led by the very communities most impacted. It calls for a deep unlearning of harmful practices and a reimagining of systems rooted in care and justice.

Community Driven Liberatory Framework



Dr. Edwards closed with a quote from Cole Arthur Riley, urging us not to cling to the illusion of reforming systems that were never meant to serve us, but instead to dream and create new ways of being. Her keynote was a call to action, but also an invitation to rest, to reflect, and to believe in the power of community to lead us to liberation.



Event Feedback Surveys

A brief survey was shared with those in attendance to solicit feedback on the event. The organizing group will use this information to plan for future symposiums. It was an important consideration for us to compare the feedback and experience between the diverse groups participating, youth, service providers and system players. It is important to note that even though the number of youth respondents was low, youth shared their feedback verbally/informally with their team leaders. This lends to the idea that surveys/questionnaires may not be the preferred method of collecting feedback, especially as marginalized communities tend to be over surveyed.

Total Respondents	32
Identified as Youth	10
Identified as Service Provider	13
Identified as System Player	9

COMBINED FEEDBACK	
Topic of symposium was:	Excellent: 24 Very good: 8
Presentation on Laidlaw Report was informative	Strongly agree: 23 Agree: 8 Neutral: 1
Panel Discussions provided insight and info on symposium topic	Strongly agree: 18 Agree: 13 Neutral: 1
Overall experience of symposium	Rating a 5/5: 23 Rating a 4/5: 7 Rating a 3/5: 2

YOUTH FEEDBACK	Identified as Black: 9 Identified as Middle Eastern: 1
Topic of symposium was:	Excellent: 9 Very good: 1
Presentation on Laidlaw Report was informative	Strongly agree: 9 Agree: 1
Panel Discussions provided insight and info on symposium topic	Strongly agree: 7 Agree: 3
Overall experience of symposium	Rating a 5/5: 9 Rating a 4/5: 1

SERVICE PROVIDER FEEDBACK	Identified as Black: 6 Identified as White: 5 Identified as Middle Eastern: 1 Identified as Latin American: 1
Topic of symposium was:	Excellent: 8 Very good: 5
Presentation on Laidlaw Report was informative	Strongly agree: 8 Agree: 5
Panel Discussions provided insight and info on symposium topic	Strongly agree: 6 Agree: 7
Overall experience of symposium	Rating a 5/5: 8 Rating a 4/5: 4 Rating a 3/5: 1

SYSTEM PLAYER FEEDBACK	Identified as White: 5 Identified as Black: 1 Identified as Indigenous: 1 Identified as East Asian: 1 Did not answer: 1
Topic of symposium was:	Excellent: 7 Very good: 2
Presentation on Laidlaw Report was informative	Strongly agree: 6 Agree: 2 Neutral: 1
Panel Discussions provided insight and info on symposium topic	Strongly agree: 5 Agree: 3 Neutral: 1
Overall experience of symposium	Rating a 5/5: 6 Rating a 4/5: 2 Rating a 3/5: 1

Key Takeaways

The youth symposium created a space where youth felt energized, heard, and supported. Their high level of engagement and motivation spoke to the importance of holding regular gatherings where youth can learn, reflect, and organize together. Being surrounded by Black and Racialized mentors, participants shared honestly about their experiences and expressed frustration with systemic inaction despite numerous consultations and research reports. The discussion around the Laidlaw report reinforced the need for approaches that are rooted in community, not institutions.

This event underscored that real systems change is a long-term process, one that requires trust, patience, and sustained investment in youth leadership. From the discussions and reflections throughout the day, the following key takeaways emerged:

- **Youth are eager and ready to lead:** youth showed a strong desire to engage in conversations about systems change and to take on leadership roles. Their involvement demonstrated the importance of creating ongoing opportunities for youth to come together, learn from one another, and collaboratively identify issues they care about.
- **Community-driven approaches must be recognized and respected:** meaningful change happens when initiatives are grounded in the lived experiences and leadership of those most impacted. Supporting community-defined priorities and methods is essential for authentic engagement. For meaningful change led by marginalized communities it requires patience, deep relationship building, and responsiveness to evolving needs.
- **Community-driven Liberatory Framework:** centers collective action, cultural identity, and sustainable change led by the communities most impacted, this approach calls for a deep unlearning of harmful practices and a reimagining of systems rooted in care and justice.
- **Institutional replication often fails and can lead to performative actions:** institutions attempting to replicate grassroots efforts without true accountability or connection often results in tokenisms and extractive consultation practices that do not lead to real change.
- **Mentorship and safe spaces are foundational:** the presence of Black and Racialized mentors created a space where youth felt safe to share, be critical of past responses, and imagine new possibilities. These relationships are crucial to developing youth leadership in systems change.
- **Research must translate into action:** the presentation of the Laidlaw report sparked discussions about the disconnect between repeated consultations and the lack of visible change. Youth are calling for a shift from data collection to implementation rooted in community knowledge and leadership.

Next Steps Overview Plan: Post-Symposium Action Framework

1. Establish an Ongoing Community Engagement Structure

Objective: Maintain momentum and ensure consistent, accessible engagement with youth and community stakeholders.

Actions:

- Host Regular Community Conversations
 - Frequency: Monthly or bi-monthly
 - Location: Rotating Community Houses and CRSD partner schools
 - Purpose:
 - Provide safe spaces for youth to share experiences and ideas
 - Gather community insights on emerging challenges and opportunities
 - Foster grassroots leadership and collaboration
- Facilitation & Support:
 - Led by OCCH Youth Facilitator, in collaboration with CRSD and five Youth Support Leads
 - Include co-facilitation opportunities for youth leaders

2. Launch Quarterly Youth Symposium Series

Objective: Build on the June 2024 event by providing structured opportunities for learning, action planning, and systems engagement.

Structure:

- Frequency: Quarterly (every 3 months)
- Participants: Youth leaders, community allies, system partners (education, housing, health, justice)
- Components:
 - Youth-led learning sessions (topics based on youth interest such as advocacy, financial literacy, trauma-informed leadership)
 - Interactive skill-building workshops
 - Systems Dialogue Forums
 - Invite policymakers and service providers to receive youth feedback
 - Identify areas for systems reform and resource allocation

3. Create a Youth Systems Change Advisory Table

Objective: Ensure ongoing youth involvement in policy, planning, and evaluation processes.

Structure:

- Membership: Diverse representation from Black and Racialized youth across the city
- Mandate:
 - Advise local institutions on youth-specific priorities
 - Review and provide input on resource allocation and program design
 - Track alignment with calls to action from the Laidlaw Report

4. Monitor, Evaluate, and Amplify Impact

Objective: Document outcomes and build the case for sustained funding and support.

Actions:

- Develop a Community Impact Dashboard
 - Track engagement, themes emerging from conversations, policy shifts, and youth-led initiatives
- Share findings through community reports, newsletters, and social media
- Host an Annual Community Showcase to celebrate youth contributions and share learnings

5. Secure Long-Term Funding and Partnerships

Objective: Ensure the sustainability of this youth-centered, community-driven model.

Actions:

- Leverage symposium momentum and pilot outcomes to approach:
 - Local funders (e.g., United Way, Ottawa Community Foundation)
 - Government grants (municipal, provincial, federal)
 - Corporate and philanthropic partners
- Develop a multi-year funding proposal supported by youth testimonies, partner endorsements, and data from engagement activities

6. Maintain and Strengthen the Youth Support Leaders Team

Objective: Sustain a dedicated team of adult champions who provide mentorship, advocacy, and structural support to youth leaders and initiatives.

Purpose & Role of the Team:

The Youth Support Leaders Team plays a vital role in ensuring that youth voices are not only heard but *acted on* by systems and institutions. These are trusted adults who walk alongside youth, offering experience, access, and protection as youth navigate spaces of power and decision-making.

Core Functions:

- Mentorship & Guidance
 - Provide strategic advice, emotional support, and knowledge-sharing
 - Help youth develop leadership, facilitation, and advocacy skills
 - Model community accountability and intergenerational collaboration
- Amplify Youth Voice
 - Support youth in preparing for and presenting at community or systems-level forums
 - Ensure youth perspectives are accurately represented in institutional conversations
 - Act as allies who “make space” and “pass the mic” to youth whenever possible
- Break Down Systemic Barriers
 - Use their own access, credibility, and relationships to reduce red tape and institutional resistance
 - Challenge gatekeeping and advocate within systems to shift harmful practices
 - Identify and address logistical or systemic barriers (e.g., transportation, access to resources, administrative hurdles)

Actions to Maintain and Strengthen the Team:

- Ongoing Professional Development
 - Regular training on trauma-informed care, anti-racism, youth-led practice, and systems navigation
 - Peer learning sessions to share strategies and challenges
- Clear Commitment Structure
 - Define team member responsibilities, time commitments, and principles of engagement
 - Use co-created agreements to guide expectations and accountability
- Integrate into All Activities
 - Ensure Youth Support Leaders are embedded in community conversations, symposia, action project mentoring, and advisory tables
 - Use their presence to help normalize youth participation in decision-making spaces

- Recognition and Care
 - Celebrate and acknowledge the contributions of Youth Support Leaders
 - Ensure they also receive support and avoid burnout through reflective practice and team building

Timeline	Key Activity
Summer 2024	Launch monthly Community Conversations
Fall 2024	First Quarterly Youth Symposium (Oct 2024)
Late Fall 2024	Youth Systems Change Advisory Table formed
Spring 2025	Second Symposium + Community Showcase
Ongoing	Secure Funding and Partnerships
Ongoing	Support Youth Support Leaders Team

Appendix: Panelist Biographies I wonder if we should give a short synopsis on how and why we selected the panelists. This might be getting into the weeds/revealing too much about our approach? On the other hand, framing the logic of selection and outreach might make it stronger?

This appendix consists of biographies of the youth and systems panelists who contributed their insights and lived experiences to the symposium. Their perspectives shaped critical conversations on systemic change, advocacy, and youth-led action.

Youth Panelists: The premise behind facilitating panels revolved around the importance of learning from lived experiences and having an open dialogue about youth-driven systems change. The process of choosing the youth panel began from the need to highlight community-based programming, which allowed us to showcase youth workers in our neighbourhoods. Our youth panelists are leaders in their communities, and many of the youth attending the symposium have relationships and/or engaged with them. This is a key component of fostering trust and rapport, leading to meaningful engagement and open dialogue.

Most importantly, the youth panelists featured were not only participants in a conversation, but they are also active changemakers who exemplify youth leadership through their everyday work in community. Each panelist demonstrates initiative, care, and commitment to the well-being of their peers, and play a vital role in creating empowering environments for other youth. From Banff Community House, youth leaders such as Tommeson, Mariana, and Ife provide culturally responsive programming and direct support to youth. Their work focuses on building trust, creating inclusive spaces and supporting academic, emotional, and social development for youth in their neighbourhoods. Manock, founder of a community-based sports and mentorship organization, has developed programming as a tool to foster confidence and life skills amongst Black and Racialized youth. Chris supports youth navigating systemic barriers such as housing, education, and justice by offering wraparound, trauma-informed support rooted in relationship-building and advocacy. Their leadership is grounded in empowerment, representation, and accessibility, with a strong commitment to ensuring youth feel seen and supported. Collectively, they exemplify what it means to build life skills, leadership, and bring about systemic change for communities.

Manock originates from South Sudan and grew up in the Overbrook neighbourhood. He is a former professional basketball player, community leader and founder of Prezidential, a non-profit organization based in Ottawa. Through Prezidential, he provides free basketball and life skills programs. Manock's approach instills values of community and belonging in his players and fosters an environment of acceptance and positivity. Manock's commitment to mentoring youth through sport truly sets him apart as a leader and mentor

Ifé Dadjo

Ifé is a 20-year-old Carleton University student majoring in film and women & gender studies. She has been a Youth Worker at Banff Community House for two years and is passionate about creating inclusive spaces for youth.

Tommeson Toussaint

Tommeson is the Community Support Coordinator at the Banff Community House. He has a social service worker background from Algonquin College and over six years of experience in community housing. Tommeson chose this line of work because he wants to make a difference with youth and children. Outside of work, he loves playing basketball and staying active.

Chris Ibrahim

Chris is a Youth Outreach worker at the Centre for Resilience and Social Development. In his role, he engages with black and Racialized youth who are currently facing systemic barriers and empowers them through supportive relationships. By working with Black and Racialized students, he recognizes and understands the unique challenges that Racialized youth face due to systemic barriers and offers them a safe and nonjudgemental space where they can feel comfortable and receive help in overcoming their obstacles. Chris has previous experience at the Debra Dynes Family House where he assisted Racialized families and youth through wraparound supports. Chris loves doing what he does because he sees the youth as the leaders of our future and believes they should be the biggest priority in terms of support.

Mariana Shandwe

Mariana is 20 years old and a Youth Worker at the Banff Community House. Growing up in the Ledbury community, Mariana was heavily engaged in the child and youth programs offered through the community house. She describes programming as being a strong support for her throughout her childhood. For this reason, she has made the commitment to make a positive impact in her community as a mentor and youth leader.

Systems Panelists:

In curating the systems panel, the goal was to bridge the insights shared by youth with the perspectives of systems-facing professionals who are actively working to shift policy, service design, and institutional response. The panelists selected are committed to equity, anti-racism and community-driven solutions in their fields, including education, mental health, housing, and advocacy. Many youth in attendance were familiar with these panelists, some have accessed their programs or supports, and have built relationships with them; this strengthened the trust, relevance, and openness in the conversations had throughout the day. Thus, creating a space for honest reflection on the limitations of current systems, while identifying opportunities for collaborative change driven by community and youth voices. Their presence reinforced the importance of aligning community-driven practices and solutions with lived experiences of those most impacted.

The panelists are all leaders working to transform systems to better serve Black and Racialized youth. Karen, a researcher and housing advocate brings experience centering lived expertise in the design of homelessness and housing policies. Gerald is a community engagement specialist and youth advocate, applies practices embedded in community development which connects system navigation with culturally rooted support. Lamar, a mental health leader bridges service provision and advocacy by supporting Black and Racialized youth, adults and families, through holistic interventions. Mandy, Executive of CRSD develops and implements systems-level interventions grounded in anti-oppression, healing, and trauma-informed care. Together, the panelists reflect a wide spectrum of institutional and grassroots strategies demonstrating how aligning systems change and community-driven work can drive more just and responsive change for youth.

Gerald Dragon

Gerald Dragon has worked within the field of Community and Social Services for over 20 years. Since 2011 he has been employed at the Sandy Hill Community Health Centre where he has held a variety of roles within the Community Development and Engagement Team. Outside of work his interests include: reading, music, the natural environment and city building.

Mandi Pekan, MA, RP

Mandi Pekan is a psychotherapist, part-time professor, and trauma trainer with over 15 years in community development. She plays a key role at the Centre for Resilience and Social Development (CRSD), where she oversees mental health, advocacy, and justice initiatives. Mandi's work is deeply influenced by an embodied social justice approach, focusing on the systemic, relational, cultural, and political aspects of trauma and healing. She is dedicated to creating systemic changes by actively promoting community-driven alternatives to youth criminalization and incarceration.

Karen Umurerwa

Karen Umurerwa is a Research Assistant at the University of Ottawa and serves on the Expert Steering Team at the Alliance to End Homelessness Ottawa. The Expert Steering Team comprises individuals who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness, leveraging their strengths, skills, and experiences to drive significant changes in the housing and homelessness system in Ottawa. In her dual roles, she combines academic research with practical, community-focused efforts to address and mitigate homelessness.

Lamar McCormack, MCP, RP (Qualifying)

Lamar McCormack an Ottawa native of Jamaican heritage, graduated with a Master of Counselling Psychology with a concentration in School and Youth psychology from the University of Adler in Vancouver. With 10 years of experience working in youth and community mental health in both Ottawa and Vancouver, Lamar is currently working as a Community Mental Health Counsellor with Britannia Woods Community House, providing mental health counselling and supports to Black and Racialized children, youth, adults and families that wouldn't otherwise have access to such services.